



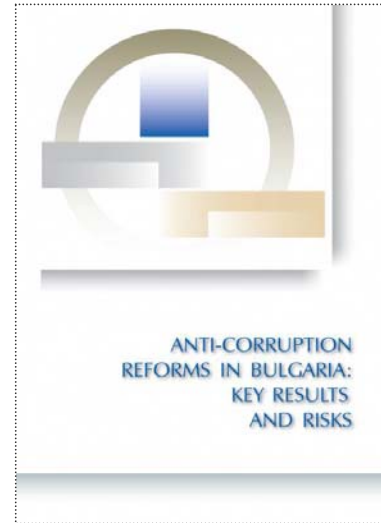
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Bi-weekly Newsletter

>> Center for the Study of Democracy Annual Anti-Corruption Policy Forum

On April 23, the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), a USAID-supported Bulgarian think tank, released their eighth Corruption Assessment Report (CAR) at their annual Anti-Corruption Policy Forum. Held at the Boyana Conference Center, the forum was attended by many high level Bulgarian Government officials, such as Interior Minister and Chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission, Rumen Petkov, Bulgarian Prosecutor General, Boris Velchev, and Sofia Mayor, Boyko Borisov, as well as Ambassadors and representatives of other governments, including U.S. Ambassador John Beyrle, who presented the opening remarks.

The press coverage of the event highlighted Ambassador Beyrle's comments on CSD's analysis of the immense cost of corruption to all Bulgarian citizens. Citing the World Bank, Ambassador Beyrle stated that 900 million leva are lost to the Bulgarian public due to fraud and corruption of tax officials. CSD estimates the loss to the public through corruption in public procurement at 20–25 % of the entire public procurement budget. In other words, because of corruption, Bulgarians are paying an average of 20–25% extra on every contract that their government signs. Ambassador Beyrle challenged the Bulgarian government to be more serious about convicting public officials of corruption crimes.



The Corruption Assessment Report analyzes the main results and risks of the Bulgarian anti-corruption strategy. The report focuses on implemented during the period immediately preceding Bulgaria's accession to the EU through the first months of EU membership. Born out of the Anti-Corruption Action Plan produced by **Coalition 2000** in 1998, the report is a comprehensive document evaluating both the prevalence of corruption and the delivery of government policies aimed at combating it. CSD aims to make corruption one of the most important items on Bulgaria's political agenda and to provide detailed suggestions on legislation, institutional reform, and the strategic approach Bulgaria should take in order to effectively and address the problem at its roots.

Some of the topics covered in the Report include:

- ❖ Heightened Public Sensitivity and Intolerance Towards Corruption
- ❖ Corruption in Public Procurement
- ❖ Transparency in the Management of EU Funds in Bulgaria
- ❖ The Role of State Institutions in the Fight Against Corruption

For more information about this and other related CSD events and publications, please visit the CSD website at <http://www.csd.bg>

>> Supreme Judicial Council Approves USAID-Supported Information Center Model for All Bulgarian Courts

Following nine months of development by USAID court partners across the country, the model of the Bulgarian Court Information Center was approved by the Supreme Judicial Council on April 11. The USAID Judicial Strengthening Initiative and the SJC will now jointly distribute the comprehensive Information Center Concept to all Bulgarian courts. Based on the work of USAID-supported centers currently serving 19 courts nationwide, the Information Center Concept was produced by a twelve-member Working Group made up of court chairpersons, administrators, press attachés, clerks, and IT specialists.



Courthouse Information Centers are an essential tool in bridging the divide between the public and its judicial institutions. The centers provide prompt and accurate information and the spirit of customer service, and are a low-cost and flexible method for courts to increase overall efficiency, openness, and public trust.

Courts now using Information Centers in Bulgaria have reported more efficiency in intake office work because most inquiries from the public are handled at the Information Center. The SJC-approved Working Group Concept is a detailed guide to more than just the physical centers themselves – it proposes the unification of application forms, brochures, and courthouse signage, and emphasizes training in the processes of providing public information. The SJC decision is a landmark step in guaranteeing a future for this USAID legacy, explained Presiana Manolova, JSI Legal Advisor: “Now individual courts will be able to apply for support from the SJC to develop their own information centers, using the approved Concept as motivation for their proposals.” ❖



In Plovdiv, Regional Court Chair Vesselin Hadjiev (left) and Appellate Court Chair Radka Petrova (right) celebrate the opening of the Plovdiv Information Center in November 2006.

>> USAID-sponsored Survey on Public Attitudes about Roma Entrepreneurship Points to Benefits of Microcredit

At a press conference on April 24 in Sofia, USAID, Catholic Relief Services Europe & Middle East (CRS), Mikrofond EAD and Ustoi AD presented the results of a survey on the topic: “Public Attitudes toward Roma Entrepreneurship in Bulgaria” conducted with the expert assistance of Alpha Research Ltd.

The study was commissioned by CRS as part of the joint USAID/CRS/Microfund/Ustoi project “Alliance for Inclusive Business Development of Roma Communities in Bulgaria” which provides microlending opportunities in selected Roma communities—the first micro-finance program with a special focus on Roma and disadvantaged minority communities.

The qualitative survey covered Roma, Bulgarian and Muslim citizens from the project’s seven target communities: Sofia /Samokov, Silistra, Sliven, Burgas, Razgrad, Omurtag and Pazardjik. Both Roma and non-Roma survey respondents pointed to a lack of education, dependency on state welfare and increasing marginalization as obstacles to increased economic prosperity among Roma. Limited access to information and credit were also cited as problems in Roma communities. Among the factors cited for inhibiting Roma access to bank loans for starting or expanding businesses are a lack of regular income and property.



The study on Roma entrepreneurship identified the need for Roma children to be integrated into the educational system at an early age in order to break the cycle of poverty.

The results pointed to the potential of microlending to create a series of positive incentives for Roma clients. Most interviewed agreed that receiving a loan will have a positive impact on fostering a desire to work and repay the loan, leading in turn to increased investment and enlargement of the business. Roma and non-Roma clients differed in their views about the entrepreneurial spirit of Roma, with Roma respondents assessing it more positively.

“Microlending on a grass roots level is an opportunity for people from marginalized communities to start up businesses, as a way to eradicate dependency on grants and social benefits,” said USAID Mission Director Michael Fritz. ❖